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Senior Health and Wellness Newsletter

Kentucky Department for Aging and Independent Living

Asthma in Older Adults

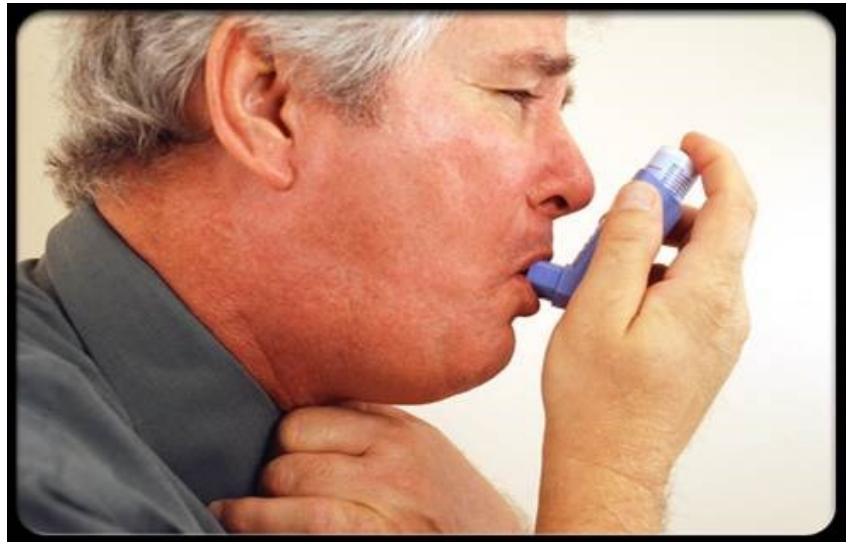
What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic disease that causes bronchoconstriction and spasms, otherwise known as tightening of the muscles around the airways, as well as inflammation of the airways and excessive mucus production. There may be periods when there are no symptoms, but the airways are always swollen and sensitive to some degree. Long-term anti-inflammatory medications are the proven treatment to control airway inflammation and eliminate or reduce symptoms.

Symptoms of Asthma

Common symptoms of asthma include frequent cough, shortness of breath, rapid breathing, chest tightness, chest pain, wheezing, and fatigue. Not all people have the same symptoms, and symptoms vary greatly in severity. Overall, symptoms are often worse at night and in the early morning hours. The severity of asthma varies from person to person and may worsen or improve depending on the person's symptom control and amount of exposure to triggers or allergens.

During an asthma episode, muscles around the airways tighten, linings of the airways become inflamed, and mucus clogs the airways, making breathing difficult. The air-



ways become overly responsive to environmental changes, sometimes resulting in wheezing, coughing, breathlessness, or tightness in the chest. During an asthma episode, an individual may feel like he or she can't inhale enough air, but actually, the lungs are having trouble exhaling. When left untreated, the inflammation can cause recurrent episodes of wheezing, coughing, breathlessness, and chest tightness. Potential airway remodeling or lung scarring can also occur when asthma goes untreated.

What Causes Asthma?

Exposure to certain allergens or irritants trigger asthma symptoms to begin. Food allergies have been recently found to be a major risk factor for severe asthma and life-threatening asthma episodes. Additionally, asthma may be caused by genetic, immune, or environmental factors, and is often associated with scaly skin patches known as eczema. (continued on back)

Some examples of the most common asthma triggers include seasonal pollens, animal dander/ saliva/urine, dust mites, mold, air pollution, tobacco smoke, and diesel fumes, just to name a few. Strong emotional feelings such as crying, laughing, or even fear and agitation can set off an asthma episode in some people. However, just because the trigger is a psychological factor does NOT mean the asthma episode is not a physical reaction.

Controlling Asthma

There are two categories of asthma medications: controller medications and reliever/rescue medications. Controller medications must be taken everyday, regardless if there are symptoms or not. Typically, it can take up to 3 weeks before the inflammation in the lungs is reduced. While it may be difficult to realize the benefit of these medications in the short-term, the long-term benefits result in a greatly reduced frequency of asthma episodes.

Rescue medications are used to prevent exercise-induced asthma or to treat an emerging asthma episode. These medications work by relaxing the contracting muscles of the airways.

We Need to Know More

While it is known that asthma may be caused by genetic, immune, or environmental factors, researchers do not completely understand all of the causes of asthma or its increasing prevalence. Additionally, according to the Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America, Louisville is one of the hardest places to live with asthma in the United States. Because not much is known about asthma in older adults at this point, a team at the University of Louisville is conducting a federally funded research study called “Asthma in Older Adults: Identifying Phenotypes and Factors Impacting Outcomes.”

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the environmental and personal factors in asthma controls. Qualified participants are 60 years of age or older and have asthma. Additionally, participants must not live in a nursing home, have another lung disease besides asthma, be a current or recent smoker, or have any major medical health problem in the last 3 months. Study participants will receive \$200 in gift cards, asthma trigger control supplies, and test results.

To find out more, or to see if you would be a qualified participant in the study, contact the Research Coordinator, Susan Rames at (502) 852-2273 or at asthma@louisville.edu.

References:

American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology: www.aaaai.org

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: www.aafa.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/asthma

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